



white paper



Unlocking Candor in Online Qualitative Research: The Power of the Online One-on-One

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Candid feedback. Uninhibited conversation. Unvarnished insight. These are the high-level goals of qualitative research, yet too many of the most relied-upon methodologies fall short of achieving them. From traditional focus groups to newer approaches such as online bulletin boards, the pressures of social interaction and group dynamics hinder respondents' ability to speak freely, and too often leave them reticent and self-editing.

One methodological exception to this is the online one-on-one conversation.

Because online one-on-one conversations combine the intimacy of a one-on-one setting with the virtual separation of the Internet, they remove the social and group pressures that can hamper candor, resulting in extraordinarily open discussion on even the most sensitive topics.

This paper will explore candor in online qualitative research, discuss the importance of anonymity and take a look at why when it comes to candor, not all methodologies are created equal.

How the online space encourages candor

Unlike in-person focus groups or in-depth interviews, respondents in online qualitative studies are safely removed from moderators or other group members when they provide their feedback. Sitting at computers all over the country or the world, they enjoy a level of privacy that offline approaches simply cannot provide.

This allows respondents to remain virtually detached from the end recipient of their remarks. The anonymity associated with this creates something that psychologists call the “disinhibition effect.” In a nutshell, it means that people feel less vulnerable about opening up when they’re online. Because of the environment they are in, they can speak without inhibition on the most sensitive topics, knowing that what they say will never be traced back to their “real” selves.¹

Furthermore, because many online qualitative methods don’t use video or audio, social cues such as body language and tone of voice do not factor in as they do in face-to-face approaches. Removing these cues significantly reduces respondents’ perception of social boundaries, presumably resulting in greater freedom of expression.²

The power of anonymity on difficult topics

While the benefits of anonymity are great for virtually any research topic, it is particularly meaningful when researchers are seeking insight around difficult or sensitive subject matter, such as politics, addiction, hygiene, sexuality, finances, health, the elderly, unemployment or the environment.

Anonymity makes sensitive topics much easier to talk about because the respondent is in an environment that gives them the freedom to express themselves without boundaries and group biases. This often leads to increased candor.

Therefore, although conventional wisdom says that respondents are often reticent on these touchy subjects, some online methodologies that offer true anonymity challenge this assumption.

Candor in online qualitative: a methodological breakdown

Because all online qualitative approaches offer some degree of anonymity, it would be easy to assume that candor is fairly easy to achieve in the online space. The truth is not so simple.

It is true that in the right online settings “people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms.”³ However, while online tools create the potential for intimate, revealing responses, very few online qualitative methodologies successfully capitalize on this potential.

This incongruity reinforces the fact that no methodology is one-size-fits-all, and that researchers must take care to select the tools and approaches that best fit a project’s objectives and subject matter, not just its budget and timeline.

With that in mind, the following list offers a brief snapshot of leading online qualitative tools and how well they deliver (or don’t deliver) true candor.

¹ “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” J. Suler

Online Focus Groups and Bulletin Boards

Online focus groups and bulletin boards do achieve a degree of candor. However, groups and asynchronous methods that allow respondents to view their peers' postings have a tougher hill to climb to promote openness. This is due to the group nature of these approaches, which has a dampening effect on respondents' perceived anonymity.

In this setting, a desire to fit in or to please others can lead individuals to hold back their true thoughts, and to shape their communication to fit what they believe the group expects of them. Additionally, this environment can result in what is known as "groupthink," in which members of a group agree with one another out of a sense of camaraderie with other group members, and often disregard outside views or perspectives.

Therefore, whether asynchronous (bulletin boards) or real-time (focus groups), these methodologies can result in self-censorship. While respondents can hide behind a screen name, they still face the pressures of group discussion. In the end, these approaches can lead respondents down a path that inhibits true candor.

Video in Online Qualitative Research

Video in online qualitative research has gained popularity recently, and is being used in some online chats and focus groups. However, researchers seeking to gain the benefits of anonymity should be cautious when using this type of approach because by its very nature, all video functions effectively remove the veil of anonymity. Although a person's true name may be hidden, the fact that they are exposed on camera for other members of the group and/or the moderator means that as far as social pressures and implications go, it's no better than methods with a true group dynamic.

Online One-on-Ones

One-on-one approaches, such as online conversations, generate perhaps the highest level of respondent candor because they remove the group dynamic entirely. The anonymity inherent in this online setting reduces inhibition and creates an environment where respondents are more willing to express themselves. The fact that the interaction in a one-on-one occurs between just two people, the respondent and the moderator, eliminates the inhibition effect of group pressures and dynamics. Conversing one-on-one over an instant message platform is decidedly different than the communication vehicles utilized by other approaches. This method was created with anonymity in mind and the resulting conversations are rife with candor.

Case study: private thoughts versus public statements

One powerful example of how online one-on-ones achieve greater respondent candor than other methodologies involves a recent study about on-the-job training for blue-collar workers conducted using both traditional focus groups and online one-on-ones.

While blue collar workers would not typically be considered a difficult group to elicit honest feedback from, and job training not necessarily a touchy subject, this group proved to be much more candid and forthright when protected by the anonymity of an online one-on-one conversation than they were when sitting in a focus group facility surrounded by their peers.

In the focus groups, the respondents expressed limited interest in, and some resistance to, job training services. However, those queried about it in an online one-on-one setting were much more willing to say that they needed and would seek out these services.

In this case, the group dynamic and social pressures inherent in a focus group influenced the way respondents answered a critical question. They wanted to appear confident, successful and macho to their peers in the room, and answered in a way they felt would support this image.

In contrast, when responding to the question via an online conversation, the privacy and anonymity of this methodology made them feel safe enough to give their true feelings, not the answer they thought the group would want to hear.

As a result, this study revealed that these blue-collar workers are in fact interested in training. Moreover, their reticence in discussing the matter when surrounded by their peers provided useful guidance as to how such a training program should be administered.

Conclusions

Over the past several years the migration to online qualitative research has expanded the research toolbox and created a wealth of innovative and powerful methodologies to choose from. However, researchers whose primary goal is honest, open and candid feedback must evaluate these methodologies with an understanding of the factors that lead to candor.

The Internet has added a shroud of anonymity to the respondent experience, creating an environment in which respondents are more likely to speak freely and without inhibition. But not all online methodologies are created equal. Of the leading qualitative online tools—online focus groups, online bulletin boards where postings are shared and online one-on-ones—only online one-on-ones offer the privacy of online without the pressures of a group dynamic.

Ultimately, for those seeking to maximize the power of the online setting by eliminating group pressures and preserving utter anonymity for the respondent, one-on-one conversations provide the greatest opportunity to do so, and often produce the most candid feedback.